

Theatre Review: 'Then Athena' at Allentown Public Theatre

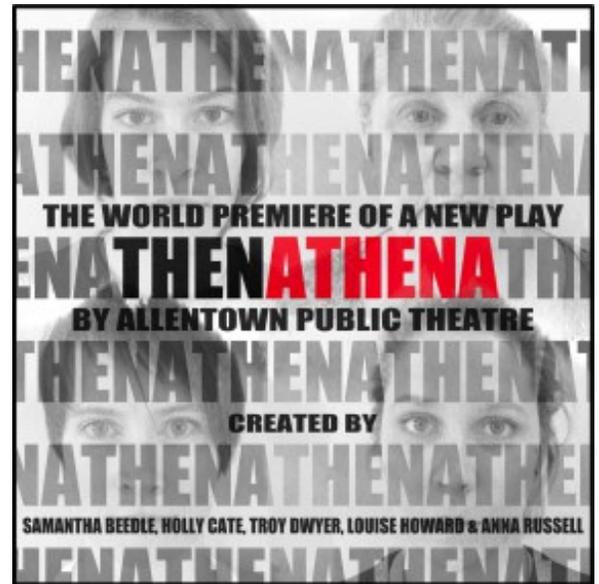
 patheatreguide.com/2016/09/11/theatre-review-then-athena-at-allentown-public-theatre/

By Katarzyna and Cain Elliott-Maksymowicz

September 11, 2016

As a work of devised theatre, "Then Athena" is an experimental effort by the performers involved, Sam Beedle, Holly Cate, Troy Dwyer, Louise Howard and Anna Russell, to deconstruct and intensify the contradictory personalities and depictions of women at war. With the audience seated in symmetrical rows to the left and right, the stage possessed minimally simple props utilized multiple times to create a malleable and evolving degree of surroundings.

The performance itself rotates around a series of historical figures and scenes, including Deborah Sampson Gannett (who served in the Revolutionary War), the women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Elizabeth Holloway Marston and Olive Byrne (the spouses of William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman). But the moving force of the work rests with the performers decomposed sketch of a literary figure, the Baroness Paula von Gunther – the brilliant, fascist and, ultimately, repentant adversary of Wonder Woman. Each of the creators/performers takes a turn in the mind and voice of Gunther, exploring the impossible and nearly universal negotiation that strong women are forced into making with societal demands for passivity or submission. In this role and many others, the performance of Anna Russell (Creator/Performer) is remarkable for its intensity and command of the stage – it is her voice and background that define much of the production.



Advertisement

While this kind of experimental work should be applauded, *Then Athena* falls short and is undermined by several factors. As the program accompanying the performance notes: "Our rehearsals became much more about satisfying our individual hungers as theatre artists than about hitting an ideological target." And unfortunately, it is this disunity of voices and intentions that have been staged. The audience is left with a haphazard collection of the creator/performer's desires and interests that remains unfinished and therefore unsatisfying as an aesthetic exercise. Even with experimental theatre, the work of the stage should stand without reference to the accompanying program – "Then Athena" does not. The audience is left with what seems to be a continued rehearsal, rather than a finished work.

Throughout the performance, a series of images (largely drawn from the pages of Wonder Woman) are flashed on a screen behind the series of images that the creators/performers enact. This seems to be a fitting analogy for the divide between the audience and the performance. The audience remains split from what is happening before them, having been invited to an ongoing dialogue between the creators that has reached the stage slightly too early.

Running Time: 90 Minutes with no intermission.

"Then Athena" premiered on September 9, 2016 at the Louis Bluver Theatre at The Drake in Philadelphia as part of the 2016 Philly Fringe Festival. For more information, click [here](#).